



CHELLIE PINGREE  
CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES  
1<sup>ST</sup> DISTRICT, MAINE

August 16, 2013

The Honorable Allison A. Hickey  
Under Secretary of Benefits  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
Washington DC 20525

Dear Under Secretary Hickey,

During a congressional hearing in July of 2012, Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) officials acknowledged that many disability claims based on sexual assault could have been denied incorrectly and offered that the VA would review any previously denied claim for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder where sexual assault was the claimed stressor.

As you know, it took the VBA almost a full year to launch this review. During another congressional hearing in April of this year, VBA officials again acknowledged the review was forthcoming; however, they informed Members of Congress that VA databases could only identify a small number of denied claims and that a public outreach plan was necessary to inform eligible veterans of this review.

I appreciate the fact that the VA is undertaking this review, but I remain concerned and disappointed in the VA's follow-through so far. Even after VA officials explained that an intensive outreach plan and collaboration with veteran service organizations would be necessary to ensure awareness among MST survivors of this opportunity to have their claims reexamined, the VA has made little to no public mention of this review beyond the letters sent to roughly 2700 veterans identified within the agency's database. Despite repeated requests, there is no mention of this review on the VA's website and no press release has gone out. Additionally, despite the option to review becoming available four months ago, no procedure seems to be in place that will ensure those who are hopeful about the option to resubmit their claims are not simply placed in the queue with all of the other pending claims. Perhaps most troubling is that local and national service officers, as well as individual Regional Office VA employees are unaware of this unique review, prompting them to give inaccurate information to veterans who call asking for this assistance. Military sexual trauma (MST) survivors with denied claims have literally been calling my office and those of other Members since July 2012, asking when and how they can get their claim reviewed.

I request information regarding the VA's outreach plan for this review:

- When does the VA plan to publicly announce this review and describe it on the agency's website?
- What level of coordination has taken place between VBA and VHA (including Vet Centers) informing them of this review and how to notify veterans?

- What type of training have Regional Office employees received in order to give accurate information about this review? Many veterans report calling their local Regional Office only to be told they must submit new and material evidence in order to re-open their claim, which VA has stated is not required to receive this review.
- What level, if any, of priority will these reviews receive once a veteran requests it?
- How will VA track and record these reviews?

I sincerely appreciate the VA's willingness to undertake this review and I am also very grateful for the increased attention to and training for adjudicating MST claims since you were named Under Secretary. However, I do remain concerned for the thousands of military sexual assault survivors who could have been incorrectly denied benefits before you took your post. We have to make sure they were not denied benefits they deserve. I look forward to hearing from you and working with you on this endeavor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Chellie", followed by a long, sweeping horizontal line that extends to the right.

Chellie Pingree  
Member of Congress